

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE

Exhaust emission control apparatus and method for an internal combustion engine maintain a small amount of sulfur components contained in exhaust gas flowing out of a sulfur component retainer agent even if the amount of sulfur components retained by the agent becomes great. The exhaust emission control apparatus includes a NO<sub>x</sub> retainer agent and the sulfur component retainer agent. The apparatus performs a NO<sub>x</sub> releasing process of adjusting the air-fuel ratio of exhaust gas flowing into the sulfur component retainer agent so that the air-fuel ratio of exhaust gas flowing into the NO<sub>x</sub> retainer agent becomes substantially stoichiometric or rich of stoichiometry if NO<sub>x</sub> retained by the NO<sub>x</sub> retainer agent is to be released. The apparatus prohibits the air-fuel ratio of exhaust gas flowing into the sulfur component retainer agent from becoming substantially stoichiometric or rich of stoichiometry if the amount of the sulfur components retained by the agent is at least a first predetermined amount.